

Why Israel?

Biblical understanding concerning God's purposes for Israel and the Church

Studies

Christian Zionism

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Christian Zionists are Christians who, just like the apostles, ask Jesus the Messiah: 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' (Acts 1:6). Together with the Jewish people, and full of hope and deep expectation, they are looking forward to the deliverance and the Redeemer of Israel. It was Paul who taught them that God had not finished with Israel; as the Redeemer did not only come from Zion, but because it is also written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob'. They are Zionists, because it is written in Psalm 2:6: 'I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill'. Jesus openly declared to the world (Pilate) that He is the 'King of the Jews'. He died as the 'King of the Jews' and He will return as Redeemer and King of Israel. With Christ and the First Church, they are expecting 'times of refreshing' (Acts 3:19) for the Jewish people upon the return of the Messiah.

As predicted by the prophet Zechariah: 'This is what the Lord says: "I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the Lord Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain" (8:3). Christian Zionism therefore has old, Biblical roots. It is the prophetic expectation of the restoration of Israel and the coming of the Messiah and his Kingdom of Peace that drives Christian Zionists in their daily lives, prayer and work. They wholeheartedly cooperate with this 'restoration of Israel', preceding the end times and the return of the Messiah. That is what Christian Zionists pray for and they watch with joy as they see the Lord busy 'rebuilding David's hut that had fallen into decay'. Although Christian Zionism

has always been a small side branch of the Reformation, it did exert a major and important spiritual influence.

Fifteen centuries of wandering

The 'conversion of the gentiles' was high on the priorities of Paul and Barnabas. This was also in line with the prophetic Word and thus God's plan. It did not take long for the believers-from-the-nations to become the majority within the young churches.

Following two great disasters for the Jewish people (the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans led by general Titus in the year 70 and the final exile in the year 135 when Jerusalem was once again destroyed following the Bar Kochba revolt) the relationship between Church and synagogue was basically completely broken. Promises meant for Israel were usurped by the Church and the replacement theology was horribly practiced. The Church started to discriminate, repress and persecute the Jewish people. The 'hell of the Middle Ages' and the gruesome massacres during the Crusades were the result.

Abraham's offspring was horribly cursed in word and deed by an unfaithful Christianity. We now know that this curse has returned to haunt the Church and that this is one of the main reasons for the decay of the Church in the West. Did the Reformation not return the Church to the Biblical Jewish roots of the First Church? The different reformists, like Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli had at least one thing in common: they really wanted to return to the Bible. Would they also return to what the Bible teaches about the place of Israel in God's salvation plan for the world and about the future of Israel?

The Reformation

Many biblical truths and principles were rediscovered during the Reformation. But as far as Israel is concerned, Luther and Calvin never got much further than the Roman Catholic Church.

Judaism was a finished cause for Calvin. According to Calvin, the church is the 'new Israel' that replaced the 'natural Israel'. Because the Jews rejected the Messiah, they

forfeited their place in God's plan. This was Calvin's line of thinking and this is also how many evangelical churches perceive it today.

Isaiah's promises concerning the restoration and the future glory of Israel were transferred to the Church and the expansion of the Reformation. Today we see a similar phenomenon in many charismatic and evangelical believers, who wholeheartedly sing: 'We will fill the world with God's praise', with the emphasis on 'we'! There usually is absolutely no understanding of the role and place of Israel. Luther's initial sympathy for the Jews was short-lived and soon turned to anger, which he made public in his book 'About the Jews and their lies'. Both Calvin and Luther should have known better. Martin Bucer (1491 - 1551), the reformer of Strasbourg, was Calvin's mentor. On the basis of Romans 11:11-32 he saw a future for Israel. He taught that once the Church would be 'reformed', the Jews would convert en masse and become members of the Church, followed by the second coming of Christ. This was the first time in 15 centuries that there was a positive sound about the Jewish people. By the way, Beza, Calvin's successor in Geneva, preached the same message as Martin Bucer.

It is interesting to see that Richard Lovelace, the modern evangelical church historian, does not get much beyond Martin Bucer's teachings almost five centuries before him. He expects that the 'restoration of the Jewish people' will come through a major awakening of the faithful-from-the-nations in the churches, that will cause a massive influx of the Jews into the Church. Shem, who comes to live in Japheth's tent, instead of what Noah prophesied: 'May God extend the territory of Japheth, may Japheth live in the tents of Shem' (Gen 9:27). Martin Bucer's voice was hardly heard when it came to the Jewish people. The Reformation brought the Jews little relief. For centuries they were despised, robbed and murdered. Unfortunately, hardly a word of comfort, let alone repentance was heard from the churches in the Reformation. The opening of the Bible however did cause some light to shine over Israel. The seed of Christian Zionism was once again sown in the hearts of the believers. It is after all quite a jump for a 'normal' reader of the Bible to always read 'Church' when it really says 'Israel' or 'Jerusalem'. And an honest and open heart cannot accept that whilst all the blessings are usurped by the Church, the curses still remain with the Jews. The church has paid a high price for this theft of the heritage of Israel. For the Lord hates unrighteous robbery!

A Biblical light shines for the Puritans

Two important items play a major role in the growing awareness of the place of Israel in God's plan for salvation. Firstly, it is the Holy Spirit that gives insight through the reading and studying of the Scriptures. The renewed interest in the so-called Old Testament also plays an important role in this scenario.

It's also come out that renewals in the church coincided with a biblical movement towards the Jewish people and Israel. The English Puritans published many books in the second half of the 16th century and first half of the 17th century on the biblical promises that speak of a blessed and hopeful future for the Jewish people.

In this positive spiritual atmosphere towards the Jews, it was not difficult for the English Puritan, Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell to allow the Jews back into England in 1655, after centuries of exile. This decision, based on the hesitant rapprochement to the Jewish people, has brought England the blessing of many renewals and for a long time made this country the most powerful nation in the world. The Bible repeatedly says: "I will bless those that bless you". Or, to put it differently: 'It pays to be a Christian Zionist'.

In a spiritual sense we can claim that renewal goes hand in hand with a fresh, Biblical look at Israel as God's chosen people. It is then when Christian Zionism and spiritual renewal go together that they are most fruitful.

Big expectations

It's approximately 200 years ago that the study of the prophetic Word brought the Biblical insight to the pietistic protestants and a number of groups of English puritans to believe that the time had come for the Jews to return to the Promised Land.

It is remarkable that this vision was preached with great enthusiasm by Christian Zionists, who brought it into practice, long before the Jewish Zionist movement proceeded under the leadership of the well known Theodor Herzl.

Before we continue to expand on this very interesting history, we first have to look at something else. It would be easy to spiritually praise ourselves with the claim that 'we've always been pro-Israel'. We should never forget that these Christian Zionists only represented a small movement within the Church. The majority continued to claim that

the Church was now the 'spiritual Israel' and that there was no longer any role for the Jews in God's plan for the world. The Israel vision was almost completely lacking. Christian Zionists were often seen as a minor sect, a side-issue within the Church. But it was especially in those circles that an enthusiastic longing for the coming of the Messiah and His Kingdom took root.

Sometimes the leaders of these movements even went as far as to approach heads of state to claim the right for the Jews to settle within Palestine. Although these activities did not yield any immediate results, they were spiritually significant and contributed towards the basis for later actions that supported the return of the Jewish people.

In England, John N. Darby (1800 - 1882) wrote profoundly about Israel and the prophetic Word. He taught that once 'the time of the Church of Christ' was over, the 'time of Israel' would start anew. Following the great defection from the Church and the gathering of the Church, God's plan of salvation for and through his chosen people Israel could take center stage again.

Many evangelical Christians in the US and also in the UK think along the lines of Darby. His teachings form a major contribution to the matrix that led to such great sympathy for the State of Israel among American evangelicals. A number of American groups established themselves in Israel in the early part of the 19th century. Partly to await the coming of the Messiah and partly to help the Jews. These 'Christian settlements' all floundered. The initiative by Horatio and Anna Spafford was interesting. Together with sixteen others, they established themselves in the Muslim quarter of Jerusalem in 1881. They wanted to be there when the prophetic Word would be fulfilled. For a short period they made a daily trip to the Mount of Olives bringing tea and cake, in the hope that they would be the first ones to offer the Messiah refreshments. Although this never happened, they were among the first ones to help the poverty-stricken Jews from Yemen, arriving in Jerusalem in 1882, with food, clothing and in other practical ways. The Rabbis watched these Christian Zionists with great suspicion. They couldn't but help see the sometimes barely 'hidden agenda' of evangelism among the Jews.

Typical for this movement of the early 19th century is the expectation of the imminent return of the Lord Jesus Christ, a rock solid belief in the literal fulfillment of God's promises and the prophecies about Israel, a deep love for the Jewish people and an atmosphere reminiscent of the Great Revivals of the 19th century. The Bible, revival and

Christian Zionism are complementary! Before most Jews were even contemplating a return to Israel, the London Jewish Society (LJS) was founded in 1809. More than 70 years before the 'birth' of Zionism, protestant Christians were already urging the Jews to return to the Promised Land. The LJS was politically active in approaching European governments with the prophetic Word about the return of the Jewish people. From 1820 onwards they were active in Palestine, supporting Jews in many ways, establishing schools, places of work and in 1844, even a hospital.

It is interesting to note that Jewish millionaires and benefactors like Baron de Montefiore and Baron de Rothschild, also established hospitals in Jerusalem, partly motivated to stop Christian mission. Jewish pioneers fleeing the pogroms in Eastern Europe met with much support from the LJS. This evoked criticism from the Jews saying the refugees were driven into the arms of these missionaries by hunger. On the other hand a Jewish paper noted that the missionaries had saved many Jewish lives and another Jewish paper in a fairly critical piece, called them more Zionist than the Zionists themselves. A comment that is still heard, but nowadays coming from the churches.

Big Names

Politically these Christian Zionists were very active. The British Count Shaftesbury (1801 - 1885), famous for his efforts to put an end to slavery, proposed detailed projects for the return of Jews to Palestine under the supervision of the British government. These projects were presented to different European governments.

The American Christian Zionist William Blackstone (1841 - 1933) sent petitions to the US government that were co-signed by hundreds of prominent spiritual, political, economical and intellectual American leaders. He requested American support for the return of the Jews and for help for the Jews that had to flee because of the Russian pogroms. His actions were widely reported in the Jewish press.

Jean Henry Dunant (1820 - 1910), the founder of the International Red Cross, also played an important role. In the period 1863 - 1876 he tried to convince Jewish organizations in Europe of the need for Jews to settle in Palestine. In 1875 he established the Palestine Colonial Company. These big men all were positive and

powerful Christians, who based their lives on the Bible and were a product of the great revivals in those days.

It is good to establish that all this happened long before Theodor Herzl published his 'Der Judenstaat' and long before he organized the first Zionist Congress in 1897 in Basel, which heralded the birth of the modern Zionist movement. Of course, Christian Zionists were not alone in setting the stage for the return of the Jewish people to Israel. Jewish leaders and groups played a role in this process. It is remarkable to see that they too were pioneers among the Jews. Most Jews in those days believed that the time was not ripe for their return and that the Messiah would personally bring them back to the Promised Land.

American Evangelicals

The Christian Zionists in England prepared the spiritual ground that made it possible for the politicians to issue the Balfour Declaration in 1917. This is the birth certificate of the State of Israel; a national home in what was then called Palestine. Herzl too received support from Christian Zionists. His friend, Rev. William Hechler, proved a strong ally in promoting the return of the Jews, assisting Herzl in making appointments with European political and spiritual leaders to plead the case of the Jews in Palestine.

Conclusion

The LORD, the God of Israel, continues to execute his plan of salvation for His people. The Christian Zionist should join in with that. Remember, the King of Israel, Jesus the Messiah, is returning to Jerusalem. He is also the Head of the Church. We will have to follow Him, if we do not want the Church to lose its Head. In order to follow this road, we will have to pray and listen with an obedient heart to the prophetic Word and to what the Spirit is telling the Church.